

VZCZCXRO1908
RR RUEHDE
DE RUEHDO #0670/01 1230739
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 030739Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY DOHA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4818
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000670

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARPI STHORNE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [IS](#) [QA](#)

SUBJECT: FOURTH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: AN "ACADEMIC" EXERCISE

REF: 2005 DOHA 1226

¶1. Summary. On April 25-27, Qatar held its Fourth Interfaith Dialogue Conference. Representatives from the main monotheistic religions--Christianity, Islam, and Judaism--attended. This year's event witnessed notable differences from the previous three conferences. The conference was organized by the College of Shari'a and Islamic Studies at Qatar University; the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs delivered the opening statement; and the number of Jewish and Christian participants was significantly higher than in previous years, while local Qatari participation was minimal. However, these differences failed to produce any meaningful or inspiring outcome but rather contributed to a lackluster conference. End Summary.

¶2. In the weeks leading to the Fourth Conference there was little if any mention of the upcoming event. Unlike last year's event which witnessed controversy over the invitation and subsequent boycott by Israeli Jews and notable cleric Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi (reftel), this year's event had no such flare-up. There was no public debate about the conference, either prior to, during or after.

Total Control Or Close To It

¶3. Queries to the MFA in the days prior to the conference revealed that the College of Shari'a and Islamic Studies at Qatar University had the lead on the conference rather than the MFA, the usual organizer of international conclaves in Doha. When asked the reason for the shift, officials asserted that having the College in charge of this event was deemed more appropriate. Dr. Aisha Al-Mannai, the dean of the College of Shari'a and Islamic Studies and the coordinator of the conference, said of her role that she had been given full control of the conference and a free hand in inviting Muslim and Christian participants in coordination with the MFA. However, the MFA was responsible for inviting the Jewish participants.

More Talk, Less Debate

¶4. This year, the Amir did not deliver the opening remarks and was conspicuously absent from the conference. Instead, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Bin Abdulla Al-Mahmoud, officiated at the opening ceremony. In his opening remarks, Al-Mahmoud welcomed the participants and expressed his hopes that the conference would be a vehicle for promoting mutual understanding and cooperation among the faiths. Al-Mahmoud also reproached those who insulted religious figures, stating that such offenses were unacceptable, unjustifiable and discriminatory, and called on participants to explore the best means of implementing recommendations from last year's conference.

15. The conference covered the role of religion in civil rights, education, enhancing moral values, environment, freedom of expression, gender equality, globalization, peacemaking, pluralism, and scientific developments. At times the presentations remained on a purely scholarly level. One notable exception was the presentation by Jacob Bender, an American Jew who is currently making a documentary that explores a "dialogue of civilizations" and interfaith relations through the achievements of a Muslim, Jew and Christian during the Middle Ages. His talk sparked great interest among participants in his film as an educational tool for promoting religious toleration and interfaith understanding.

Higher Numbers and New Faces

16. Participation in this year's conference rose significantly in comparison to last year. There was a total of 131 participants this year as opposed to 82 last year. Although Muslims figured largely, 37 Christians and 14 Jews participated. According to Al-Mannai, speaking and moderating roles were equally divided among the representatives of the three faiths. This year also witnessed the participation of Iranians for the first time. Both Sheikh Mohamed Ali Al-Taskheri, general secretary of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic School of Thoughts, and Siboh Sarkis Sian, a bishop of the Armenian Orthodox Church, participated and spoke about the role of religion in globalization and civil rights.

Qataris Still Adjusting to Jewish Participation

DOHA 00000670 002 OF 002

17. Relatively speaking, the participation of Jews in the conference remained a sensitive issue this year. Jews from the U.S., Europe and Israel participated in the conference. According to Al-Mannai, the relative large number of Jewish participants raised protest among some Qatari invitees and led to their refusal to participate in the conference. Except for a few faculty members from the College of Shari'a and Islamic Studies who were attended, Qataris were largely and visibly absent from the conference. Notably absent also was cleric Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi, who was not invited because of his position on Jewish participation in the previous year's conference. In his Friday sermon the day after the conference concluded, al-Qaradawi made no mention of the conference. Al-Mannai emphasized that individuals declined to participate not because they are against the Jewish faith, but because of Israeli policies--a sentiment also reiterated by a MFA official. According to the official, local Qatari participation in the Dialogue had decreased due in large part to reservations about the participation of Israeli rabbis. The official stressed that the reservation was not religious in nature, but rather political-i.e., an outward display of support for the Palestinians.

18. Local concerns about Jewish participation however, did not seem to trickle down to other participants at the conference. Muslim and Jewish participants could be readily seen interacting closely together and engaging in deep conversation throughout the conference. Perhaps in this one aspect, the conference appeared successful--facilitating genuine one-on-one dialogue between participants of all faiths.

Conclusion

19. The Fourth Interfaith Dialogue Conference issued various statements and recommendations at its conclusion. There was a recommendation to form a follow-up committee to work on establishing a center for religious dialogue in Qatar, a proposal advanced by the Amir at last year's conference.

Participants also called for the expansion of the dialogue to include non-monotheistic religions. Another proposal was directed at the UN, calling for a resolution making it illegal to insult religions and religious symbols. Other more general and intangible statements focused on the importance of education and culture and the arts in promoting religious understanding, the re-affirmation of right of individuals to choose their own religions, equality between the sexes, and the family unit as the basis of human society.

Comment

¶10. A larger participation notwithstanding, this year's conference did little to advance any real or substantive dialogue between the religions. Discussion was for the most part stale and remained on a superficial level. The fear of offending any one religion or creating controversy appeared to have obviated any critical discussion. Even the more interesting and thought provoking presentations were quickly forgotten as moderators regulated audience comments, making any real debate impossible. Having said that, Qatar should still be commended for doing what no one else in the region appears willing to do: bringing representatives of the three religions together to engage in dialogue.

UNTERMEYER